COMMUNION MEDITATION
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MATTHEW 19:13-15

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Michel Quoist, a French priest, begins his excellent little volume of prayers with a chapter entitled "If We Knew How to Listen to God": the first entry is based on that vignette in the Gospels when Jesus invited little children to come to him over the protestations of the disciples. Quoist calls it "I Like Youngsters". "God says: I like youngsters. I want people to be like them. I don't like old people unless they are still children." I'm going to read it to you later in its entireity: for now it points us to the significance of what what we are doing today by including our children in what historically has been an adult experience - the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Children played a rather prominent role in the ministry of Jesus. He used their games as illustration of a point he was making on more than one occassion. In a dramatic demonstration, he brought a child into the middle of a crowd of adults one time, and advised that people need to become like children if they are interested in God's Kingdom. And, of course, he rebuked the disciples when they tried to keep children away from him. At least part of what we are saying this morning, in this special communion service, is that the Church of Jesus Christ has been, over the years, just a little bit like the disciples in its policies regarding children and the sacrament. I would hope we might be able to think that through together, and in the process learn a little bit about what Jesus meant when he used childlikeness as a model for his disciples. I would hope that we might rethink our own attitudes about the sacrament, and that our experience at the Lord's Table this morning might be fresh and new and good.

Now, how did it happen that children were excluded from the Sacrament of Communion in the first place? As usual, it's a long story,but if you will forgive the superficial handling of history I think we can cover it quickly.

In the first place, children were not excluded. The earliest form of the sacrament was the low feast, a common meal shared by the believers in one of their homes. Whole families participated: children were there. By the third century Infant Baptism was the norm,and the baptism of a child signified his belonging to the church. There was no confirmation, and the sacrament of Communion was part of the worship experience of all church members.

Then the Dark Ages and the simple low feast became the Mass. In 1215 the Church of Rome called the Lateran Council. At that Council the venerable doctrine of Transulestantiation was set forth, which held that the bread and wine were literally changed into the real flesh and blood of Christ during the Mass. And at this point a rather interesting problem emerged. If you're now handling the flesh and blood of Jesus, and not just bread and wine, it becomes suddenly important how they are handled. You certainly don't want it to be done clumsily: none ought to be spilled. And so small children were excluded for very practical reasons - reasons I appreciate having had the opportunity of wiping up a two year old and high chair after dinner.

Three centuries later the Reformers inherited all of that, plus the Dark Ages legacy of ignorance. No one understood the sacrament: no one was required to understand much of anything about the church except the clergy. The Reformers came down hard at this point. The laity needed to read the scriptures in the vernacular: the people needed to know what was happening in worship - and they did. And so it became very logical to extend the time between baptism and communion a little more, to interject instruction in Bible and theology, and to make confirmation the prerequisite for communion.

That's basically where we are today. And here ends the history lesson. Until recently the United Presbyterian Church said two things about children and communion two things that were not very consistant. First, in Infant Baptism we affirmed that children are members of the Church: that God's grace is freely given to all: that the child of a believer is an adopted child of God and that the church puts its seal of belonging on the child in Baptism. At the same time, however,the Church said that this young member could not participate in communion until he reached the age of discretion - that decision being left to the Session - and that a communicant or Confirmation Class would be offered at that time.

The Church never said that Baptized children weren't members - only that they couldn't commune. until they confirmed personally those affirmations made on their behalf at the time of baptism. But, in fact, confirmation became the act of joining the Church and the pay-off became the right to eat the bread and drink the wine instead of sitting glumly staring into space. One writer said it well: "At the very moment when the Church

was most clearly showing forth its gratitude and praise for the love and unity bestowed upon it by God in Jesus Christ, the children were excluded." (Ralph Sundquist, Jr. Power to Permit, P. 29)

Well, now we're changed. In May of 1971 the General Assembly altered our Constitution granting local Sessions the power to permit families under their care to include baptized children in the Sacrament. In April of this year, the Session of this Church agreed that the new policy would henceforth decide whether or not their children should commune. And that the new policy should be celebrated by a special observance - which we are doing today. Hereafter children will be welcome to commune, with the careful and thoughtful consent of their parents.

And I, for one, see it as the final coming together of two very important statements: one from the Presbyterian Book of Order: "The Holy Table is none other than Christ's Table. He invited those who put their trust in him to share in the feast which he has prepared." The other from the heart of our Lord: "Let the children come to me: for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven."

It would be a serious misinterpretation of what we are doing to regard it as a loosening of Presbyterian Discipline. It is not that at all. It does not mean that the Lord's Table may be approached flippantly, causally or thoughtlessly.

It assumes that spiritual growth happens early in life: that it happens through experience more than simply telling a child what occurs in communion: that it happens in the unique family relationship - that parents an the best teachers and that we have a ministry with our own children that can be delegated to no one else.

And it assumes that Jesus was quite serious when he suggested that all of us need to become like children in his Kingdom. Herein lies the deeper personal significance of what we do today, for we are invited to come to these tables this morning - all of us - as children. Not childishly, but honestly - in a way that relates to Jesus' own obvious love for that special quality of humanity that all of us lose when life forces us to "grow up."

In the best seller "I'm O.K - You're O.K," a very helpful book, Dr. Thomas A. Harris proposes that all of us have three ways of relating to others. All of us have a child

a natural, open, free spirit. All of us have an adult - through which we transact our business. And all of us have a Parent - a rigid, sometimes moralistic disciplinarian. Harris suggests that there is constant conflict in most of us between our parent and our child: that for most of us, our child has been branded "Not OK", and we have learned to repress all the joy and laughter and openness and love that we were born with.

Illustrations are better than theory at this point. The Child in us wants to be open to love and affection. The Parent says "hold it in: don't show it."

The Child in us wants to trust. The Parent says "You have to look out for other people."

The Child in us want to shout for joy, cry in grief, laugh and sing. The Parent says, "This isn't the place for that kind of thing."

The Child in us looks at a bird on wing and wonders and enjoys. The Parent says "stop wasting time - if you're interested in birds, here's a book on ornithology."

At the Table of our Lord, the Child in us want to stand in amazement at the incredible love of a creater God who gives his only son: to shout for joy at the goodness of a God who forgives us: to embrace a neighbor who is one with me in the love of God. And the Parent asks "How is the body and blood representative of Christ?" The Parent says: "Hold it in: don't respond: don't let it happen."

Here, at the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, on this day - our comfortable academic categories, our fancy theology, are out of place. Here we come as children - sensing rather than understanding the love of God for us and our unity in that love.

Here - today - we welcome them - our children: as together we affirm this mysterious but simple little rite in which Jesus Christ and we are somehow in touch: in which we experience something none of us can really explain or understand: namely that we are loved and accepted by God.

So, let us come - in the spirit of Michel Quoist's meditation: "I Like Youngsters."

God says: I like youngsters. I want people to be like them.
I don't like old people unless they are still children.
I want only children in my Kingdom: this has been decreed from the beginning of time.
Youngsters - twisted, humped, wrinkled, white-bearded - all kings of youngsters, but youngsters.
There is no changing it; it has been decided. There is room for no one else.

I like little children because my image has not yet been dulled in them.
They have not botched my likeness; they are new, pure without a blot, without a smear.
So, when I gently lean over them, I recognize myself in them.
I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving.
They are on the road, they are on their way.
But with grown-ups there is nothing to expect any more.
They will no longer grow, no longer improve.
They have come to a full stop.

It is disastrous - grown-ups thinking they have arrived.

I like youngsters because they are still struggling, because they are still sinning.
Not because they sin, you understand, but because they know that they sin, and they say so, and they try not to sin any more.
But I don't like grown-ups. They never harm anyone; they have nothing to reproach themselves for.
I can't forgive them; I have nothing to forgive.
It is a pity, it is indeed a pity, because it is not true.

But above all, I like youngsters because of the bok in their eyes.
I n their eyes I can read their age
In my heaven, there will be only five-year-old eyes, for I know of nothing more beautiful than the pure eyes of a child.
It is not surprising, for I live in children, and it is I who look out through their eyes.
When pure eyes meet yours, it is I who smile at you through the flesh.
But on the other hand, I know of nothing sadder than lifeless eyes in the face of a child.
The windows are open, but the house is empty.
Two eyes are there, but no light.
And, saddened, I stand at the door, and wait in the cold and knock, I am eager to get in.
And he, the child is alone.
He gets stout, he hardens, he dries up, he gets old. Poor old fellow!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Open, all of you, little old men!
It is I, your God, the Eternal risen from the dead, coming to bring back to life the child in you,
Hurry! Now is the time. I am ready to give you again the beautiful face of a child, the beautiful eyes of a child.
For I love youngsters, and I want everyone to be like them. AMEN